



Research Update is published by the Butler Center for Research to share significant scientific findings from the field of addiction treatment research.

# Substance Abuse and Crime

A troublesome relationship exists between alcohol, illicit drugs, and crime. Alcohol or drugs are implicated in an estimated 80% of offenses leading to incarceration in the United States such as domestic violence, driving while under the influence, property offenses, drug offenses, and public-order offenses.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

What exactly is the nature of the relationship between drugs and crime? Clearly, not all people who use alcohol or drugs are criminals. Further, not all criminals abuse alcohol and drugs. Still, there are consistently high levels of alcohol and drug use among criminal populations, and high levels of criminal activity among alcohol and drug abusers.

The explanation for this relationship is complex. Because the pharmacological effects of immediate and chronic exposure to illicit drugs and alcohol alters judgment and decreases self-control and inhibitions, substance users are more likely to commit crime. Alternatively, some ethnographers believe that a criminal lifestyle encourages drug use.<sup>2</sup> Still others think there may be a third factor, such as a person's biological make up and/or environment, that predisposes the person to both substance abuse and criminal behavior.<sup>2</sup>

## Alcohol

The connection between alcohol and crime is apparent. In 1998, an estimated 15,935 alcohol-related traffic fatalities, which represent the 39% of fatal motor vehicle crashes, involved alcohol.<sup>3</sup> The Department of Transportation further estimates that there are about 1.5 million DUI arrests annually.<sup>4</sup> The Bureau of Justice statistics annually conducts national surveys of representative samples of offenders under the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system, such as parolees, probationers, and prisoners. In these surveys, over 36% of these offenders under jurisdiction of the criminal justice system reported being under the influence of alcohol at the time of the crime. This accounts for approximately one and a half million convictions annually.<sup>4</sup>

There are some differences in alcohol and drug use among state and federal prisoners (see Figure 2 next page). When broken down by type of offense, state prisoners report that alcohol was used at the time of offense in 41.7% of violent crime, 34.5% of property offenses, 27.4% of drug offenses, and 43.2% of public-order offenses.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1:**  
**Types of drug/alcohol-related crimes.**

OFFENSE	DEFINITION AND EXAMPLE
<b>Drug law crimes</b>	Violations of laws concerning the possession, trafficking, and sale of illegal drugs. Underage alcohol consumption, open bottle, providing alcohol to a minor.
<b>Drug-motivated crimes</b>	Crimes committed in order to procure drugs or alcohol, or money to buy drugs or alcohol.
<b>Drug-related crimes</b>	Crimes committed while under the influence of drugs/alcohol such as DWI, and violent crimes stemming from drug effects or drug distribution-related, rival gang activities.
<b>Drugging crime victims</b>	Administering disabling drugs/alcohol to potential crime victims without their knowledge to render them helpless in order to commit a crime against them, such as rape.

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## THE HAZELDEN BETTY FORD EXPERIENCE

Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation patients are not isolated from the devastating effects of crime, both in terms of consequences of criminal behavior and also being the victim of an alcohol or drug related crime. Of the 1217 patients treated in the inpatient program at Hazelden in 1999: 12.1% reported being under jurisdiction of the court at time of admittance to treatment; 6.6% were arrested in the previous six months (over 42.4% for DWI arrests, 4.8% for domestic assault, over 21.3% for other non-DWI or drug or alcohol arrests, and over 9.9% for other arrests). Consistent with other research, Hazelden patients had fewer legal problems and consequences after receiving treatment compared with before treatment.

## CONTROVERSIES & QUESTIONS

**Question:** *Is treatment soft on crime?*

**Response:** The argument that treatment is soft on crime makes a false assumption that substance abuse treatment and punishment are mutually exclusive. The truth is that rehabilitation in many state and federal prisons successfully combines both punishment and substance abuse treatment. A crucial component of treatment programs using the Minnesota Model includes taking responsibility for wrongs done to others and a commitment not to return to harmful ways once in recovery.

**Question:** *If drug offenders aren't incarcerated, won't they continue to commit crimes?*

**Response:** Drug courts are an effective alternative to incarcerating offenders of drug-defined crime. Offenders served by the drug courts have a 4–28% rate of recidivism compared to 45% recidivism in traditional courts.<sup>9</sup>

## HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

**Educators:** Advance the idea that the relationship between drugs and crime is complex and no one simple solution exists.

**Policy:** Advocate for alcohol and drug treatment as a crime prevention measure.

**Criminal Justice System:** Include substance abuse treatment in existing prison and jail programs.

## Substance Abuse and Crime

### Illegal Drugs

The differences between drug use and alcohol use at the time of offense are clear in Figure 2. Specifically, prisoners report different rates of use at the time of the offense when broken down by type of offense. State prisoners reported use of drugs at the time of offense in 29% of violent offenses, 36.6% of property offenses, 41.9% of drug offenses, and 23.1% of public-order offenses.<sup>5</sup> In addition to using drugs at the time of the offense more than 70% of state prisoners and 80% of federal prisoners reported past drug use.<sup>5</sup>

Criminal behavior is frequently perpetrated for the purpose of gaining needed resources to support drug use. Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM), a nation-wide multi-city initiative, determines by urinalysis whether arrestees have used illicit drugs immediately prior to arrest. In 1999, most cities reported that about two-thirds of adults arrestees tested positive for at least one illegal drug, and about one-sixth tested positive for more than one illicit drug.<sup>6</sup>

### National Efforts Focus on Supply and Demand

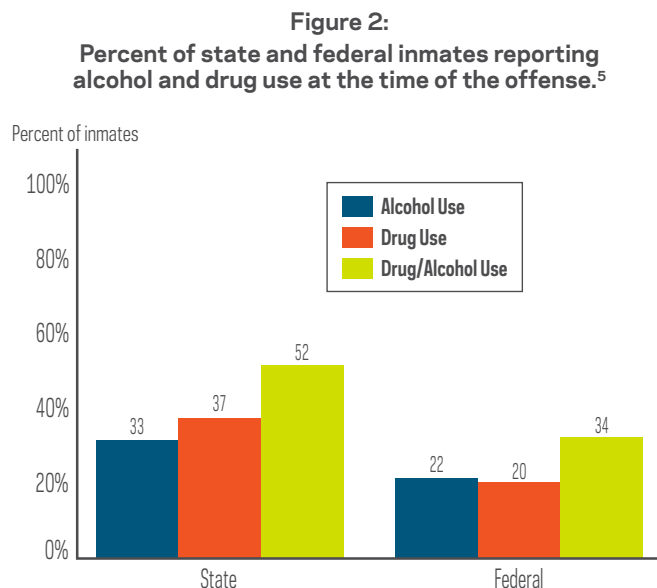
In an effort to reduce violent crime and societal costs of drug use, the Office of National Drug Control Policy is working to reduce both the supply and demand of illegal drugs. Strategies to stop crime related to drug use include reducing supply by stopping drug trafficking, decreasing domestic cultivation of illegal drugs, preventing new drug use, and the decreasing the number of chronic drug users.

Annual federal expenditures for illegal drug problems are estimated at \$18.5 billion. The justice system's efforts to stop drug trafficking, manufacturing, and sales through law enforcement accounts for 67% of the entire budget, while drug treatment accounts for 17% and drug prevention accounts for 11%.<sup>7</sup> Excluded from that budget is the Justice Department's cost to enforce alcohol laws and crimes related to alcohol use.

### Treatment Works

Research has shown that treatment works.<sup>8</sup> People can and do recover from addiction, maintaining abstinence from alcohol and drugs. Research has also shown that as substance abuse declines, so does criminal behavior.<sup>9</sup> Hence, treatment is an effective means of preventing criminal behavior.

Another advantage to treatment is that it saves money. One study found that each dollar spent on substance abuse treatment saved \$5.60 in terms of fewer arrests, incarcerations, food stamp use, and less child welfare and medical costs.<sup>10</sup> Since, criminal behavior decreases as alcohol and drug use



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decrease, it follows that drug prevention and treatment will save valuable tax dollars.

In 1997, a third of state prisoners and a quarter of federal prisoners reported participation in substance abuse programs since entering prison. The number of prisoners in substance abuse treatment programs decreased in the years between 1991 and 1997, from 25% to 10% in state prisons, and from 16% to 9% in federal prisons respectively.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the number of prisoners in non-treatment substance abuse programs, such as self-help groups and peer counseling, increased in state prisons from 16% to 20% and in federal prisons from 10% to 20%.<sup>5</sup>

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